

CAVALCADE OF COUNTIES:

LAND OF PLENTY



Pastureland scene near Ringoes, typical of present-day farmland prosperity in Hunterdon County.

Staff photos by Dorer, Porter.

Settlers of Many Nationalities Found Peace in Hunterdon County, State's First 'Melting Pot'

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

EVERY day throughout the first six weeks of 1935 the eyes of the world focused squarely on Hunterdon County—yet the world saw it not. The eyes skipped lightly over the lush farmlands and paused only briefly in Flemington to take in the exterior of the handsome old county court house. Within, on the second floor, a grim Bronx carpenter finally stopped the eyes.

Wintry blasts swept Flemington on January 2, 1935, when Bruno Richard Hauptmann sat down to face a Hunterdon County jury charged with determining whether he was guilty of the murder of Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. A regiment of writers, radio announcers, photographers and communications men moved in to make certain the world got every detail.

As quickly and as noisily as it came, the regiment stampeded out of town right after the foreman of the jury rose on February 13 to declare Hauptmann guilty. The moving fingers, having writ, moved on—and left behind only bittersweet memories and a mountain of empty beer bottles, crumpled sandwich wrappings, penciled note paper and stained coffee cartons.

To its eternal credit, Hunterdon quickly regained contentment in the pleasant rural status which some of the visiting press had deplored in dispatches to big city papers. But, as the editor of a local paper gently pointed out, Flemington had never aspired to be more than a country town. Chance, the very same chance which made Dayton, Tenn., notorious for the Scopes "monkey" trial and Callander, Ont., famed for the Dionne quintuplets,

shoved the most spectacular trial in modern history into Hunterdon's lap.

CHANCE? Take a look at the incredibly irregular border line set up when Hunterdon and Mercer counties were divided in 1838. The Lindbergh estate straddled the border line, but the house from which the baby was snatched lay on the Hunterdon side. So, Hunterdon received the designation for its 40 days of agony, of drama, of pride, of frustration.

These were days in painful contrast with the placidity which had marked Hunterdon ever since the early 1700s when the first settlers drifted up from Burlington, over the rocky slopes of the Sourland Mountain and down into what is now Hunterdon County. They came singly, in pairs, in small groups, mostly without definite colonization aims.

East Jersey and West Jersey joined hands over Hunterdon, an immense catch-all when it gained county status in 1713. It extended from Assunpink Creek north to the New York border and included most of what is now Mer-

cer, Morris, Sussex and Warren counties. The last three separated from Hunterdon in a loosely defined chunk in 1738. A full century later (1838) Hunterdon and Mercer divided on an arbitrary line through the Sourlands, a line so deviating that it prompted latter-day wags to wonder if the surveyors hadn't been sampling Hunterdon's splendid apple brandy.

This land of plenty had room for all; long before the Revolution, English, Irish, Scotch, German, Dutch and French settlers came to Hunterdon, took one look and decided to remain. Thus, Hunterdon became the state's first genuine "melting pot," where nationality met nationality without prejudice and creed met creed without rancor.

THE soil richly rewarded those who didn't mind callouses. Swiftly rushing streams watered the red, shaly soil and provided power for grist mills and saw mills. Every natural feature predestined Hunterdon County's well-being to rise and fall in direct relation to the fortunes of its farmers.

Travelers headed over Indian paths criss-crossing Hunterdon and pushed the region into an important secondary role—assistance to wayfarers. John Ringo, who built a log hut in 1720 at the junction of two cross-county trails, soon found himself entertaining strangers. John's hut grew into the widely known "Ringo's Tavern," a pleasant place to stop before venturing on to the Delaware River ferry Emanuel Coryell established in 1732 at what is now Lambertville.

Up the Raritan River came the Dutch, following as ever the banks of a fertile stream. Germans, heading overland from Philadelphia to New York, spread throughout most of the county before concentrating in the section now known as Tewksbury Township. So many had arrived there by 1750 that the area became "German Valley" and their principal settlement "New Germantown" (changed to Oldwick by World War I anti-German feeling).

An Irishman, Samuel Fleming, gave the county seat its name in 1756 by building his "castle" (a trim white structure, castlelike only in its relation to other crude houses in the area). Almost a decade before, John Philip Kase and understanding old Indian Chief Tuccamargin had come to terms in the village, but villagers were more lastingly impressed by Fleming's domicile.

ANOTHER young Irishman, Robert Taylor, arrived in 1758 and taught school for awhile before becoming bookkeeper at the Union Iron Works in the deep valley at what is now High Bridge. William Turner and Joseph

This is the tenth of a series of articles dealing with New Jersey's 21 counties, sketching their past and present with, now and then, a peek into their future. The counties will be considered in alphabetical order each week. Next Sunday: Mercer County.



Flemington's county court house was Hauptmann trial scene in 1935.



Centerville, Hunterdon gateway, retains aura of stage-coach days.



Lambertville Bridge, viewed from New Hope, Pa., doomed Coryell's Ferry in 1812. Today's steel framework replaced Delaware River flood damage.



Picturesque old mill at Clinton, on the South Branch of the Raritan.



Lambertville's main street, looking east from entrance to bridge.

Allen built the works in 1742, near the site of a much older Union Forge, and when young Taylor joined the firm were surreptitiously operating an iron slitting mill in defiance of British orders. Taylor became works manager at the age of 27 and by Revolutionary War time had full control. Incidentally, he was the first of five generations to direct the operation, which since 1912 has been the Taylor-Wharton Iron & Steel Co.)

Taylor turned diligently to making ammunition for Washington's armies, but outside of the Union Iron Works and the food production of Hunterdon's farms the war touched the county mainly at the ferry slips. Part of Gen. Washington's badly weakened

army crossed over Coryell's Ferry after the gloomy November, 1776, retreat across New Jersey. The following year some of the British prisoners captured after Gen. Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga crossed the Delaware at what is now Frenchtown on the way to prison camp.

Washington's army broke camp at Valley Forge and surged back across the Delaware in June, 1778, to begin the cross-state pursuit of the British climaxed by the Battle of Monmouth. Washington stopped briefly in Coryell's Ferry at the home of Richard Holcombe. There Mrs. Holcombe, with female curiosity, asked Washington where he was headed. "Madam, can you keep a secret?" the general asked.

"Why, yes!" responded Mrs. Holcombe. "Well," said Washington, "so can I!" Next day the army climbed the hills to the east and started after the British.

FLEMINGTON became county seat in 1785, after farmers argued that Trenton (then still in Hunterdon) was too far away. The same year Thomas Lowrey, Samuel Fleming's son-in-law, bought extensively up the Delaware River (at what is now Milford and Frenchtown). Lowrey sold 968 of his up-river acres to Paul Henry Mallet-Prevost, who fled the French Revolution in 1792, just one neck ahead of the guillotine. Mallet-Prevost stunned "Old Quicksilver" Lowrey (who loved

his interest) by paying cash. The land became known as "French's Town"—because no one ever bothered to learn Prevost was really a Swiss.

Hunterdon County felt the pinch of the Revolution badly, so much that it couldn't build its first court house until 1791. The tremendous war effort of the Union Iron Works all but closed the only real early industry in the county, mainly because the furnaces had eaten up all available timber on surrounding mountain slopes.

Creeks and streams dashing out of the mountains proved both a Godsend and a troublesome matter; the former because of the impetus they gave to rising farm prosperity and the

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Nestled in Hunterdon hills, High Bridge was named for railroad span.

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latter because they hampered travel. As early as 1795 county freeholders began levying taxes to bridge inland creeks. Spanning the Delaware, however, was left in the hands of private stock companies, two of which built bridges across the river at Coryell's Ferry and Center Bridge (Stockton) between 1812 and 1814. Through the years rampaging river waters smashed the Delaware bridges (particularly in 1841, 1862 and 1903) before steel framework fended off the fury of the river.

CORYELL'S FERRY ended with the coming of the bridge and even the name disappeared in 1812 when Senator John Lambert secured a post office and changed the village title to Lambert's Ville. Descendants of Emanuel Coryell heatedly rejected the new name ("more likely Lambert's villainy," they declared), but they pouted in vain.

The riverfront village expanded enough by 1828 to challenge Flemington's right to the county seat after the original court house burned that year. Flemington's fitness satisfied the Legislature, however, and later in 1828 the county built the court house in which the Hauptmann drama took place 107 years later. Flemington had a good case for itself—boasting the

Fulper Pottery Co. (one of the nation's first potteries) as a leading industry and pridefully pointing out that at least one resident had built a sidewalk and set out trees.

Entertainment of visitors continued a leading Hunterdon business—in Flemington, at Fleming's Castle; at Centerville, half-way point on the Swift-Sure stage route run between New York and Philadelphia, and at Larison's Corner, where the old inn attracted sporting men bent on gambling or cockfighting.

IN the northern part of the county the New Jersey Turnpike (built in 1806 to link Phillipsburg and New Brunswick) led to the building of many new inns and the revived popularity of old taverns. The sparkling white walls of the Whitehouse tavern attracted many overland passengers but others preferred the inn on "Jugtown" Mountain or the Brick Tavern at Perryville. The latter became a gathering place for scores of cattle and sheep drovers on their way to New Brunswick by way of the pike. Needless to say, the fastidious avoided Perryville and went on to Hunt's Mills (Clinton) to stay in the hotel near the old mill.

Most of the taverns naturally featured Hunterdon apple brandy, made from home-grown apples. The coun-

ty's extensive 19th Century apple orchards dated back to early deeds requiring every land buyer to plant one apple tree for each acre of ground purchased. Cider millers found Hunterdon County cider readily ripened into smooth apple brandy.

The taste for Hunterdon "apple" spread; soon wagonloads rolled to Trenton and Philadelphia for sale at 25 cents a gallon. Union Township became especially known for its brandy, with 10 distilleries spread along Spruce Run and Mulhockaway Creek. Unfortunately, the market for Hunterdon apple brandy faded before the Civil War (not that Hunterdon folk ever took more than a wee drop, anyway).

THE Belvidere-Delaware and the Jersey Central railroads gave the county an economic lift in the 1850s. Lambertville boomed as a locomotive and railroad car manufacturing center. Junction (now Hampton) sprang up in anticipation of the junction of the Jersey Central and the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad in 1856, and for its foresight the brand-new village gained extensive railroad shops.

Above all, the Jersey Central gave High Bridge both an economic shot in the arm and a new name (the latter for the extensive bridge the railroad built high over the valley). Taylor's Forge revived when the Jersey Central brought in anthracite to feed its

long-hungry furnaces. Business at Taylor's increased threefold within two years and the upsurge of the forge led to extensive iron ore mining in and near the Musconetcong Mountains—at High Bridge, Cokesbury, Asbury, Jugtown and Glen Gardner. The West End Mine at Jugtown continued until 1888, and produced a million tons of ore in its last decade of existence.

MANY a man digging Hunterdon iron ore wished he was in California with James Marshall, Lambertville local-boy-turned-famous. Marshall, who had drifted westward from Lambertville in 1834, started the 1848 gold rush when he accidentally discovered gold nuggets while digging a raceway for a sawmill, at Fort Sutter, Cal. Gold did Marshall no good; he enjoyed few comforts before he died alone in a California county hospital.

Meanwhile, on farms close to Flemington, several companies dug copper in a spectacular craze which lasted from 1836 to 1865 before the last of the copper mines closed. Hugh Capner, who sold his farm to a copper company, was said to be the only honest man to make money from the copper rush ("honest" being a qualification because a stock-jobbing outfit used the mine near Copper Hill to perpetrate a huge swindle).

Nevertheless, the real Hunterdon County gold lay for the taking in the fields and pasturelands—and for 150



Fleming's "Castle," built in 1756, is Flemington's oldest house.



Covered bridge at Sergeantsville is one of few remaining in country.



Two of the five Hunterdon County links with Pennsylvania are these Delaware River spans at Milford (above) and at Frenchtown (below).



years the ripe lands gave and gave and gave. The farmer, on the other hand, took and took and took, with the result that farming ran into sad days throughout most of the last half of the 19th Century.

RAILROAD competition hurt, because Hunterdon beef, pork, wheat and wool couldn't compete with lower-priced Western products. The taste for Hunterdon apple brandy disappeared and apple orchards wasted on the hillsides. Above all, the fabulously enriched soil finally rebelled at the poor husbandry. What happened is partially illustrated by county population. After rolling steadily upward to 40,758 in 1865, population began an unchecked slide which dropped the total to 32,885 in 1920. Hunterdon had its first population gain in 65 years in 1930 and didn't top 40,000 again until the late 1940s.

Peaches at first seemed a way out; farmers became enthusiastic after Joseph K. Potts of Franklin Township and Dr. George H. Larison of Sergeantsville started large orchards in the 1850s. Eventually 2,000,000 trees covered the county in 1890, the year the peach crop failed completely. Worse, the 1891, 1892 and 1893 crops were so tremendous that the bottom dropped out of the market. Finally, the deadly San Jose scale ate into the orchards in the late 1890s. Farmers, taking their axes to the peach orchards, chopped down more than 1,700,000 trees between 1895 and 1909. Today Hunterdon has fewer than 25,000 peach trees.

Hunterdon farm values reached a low point in 1900. Yet, even as agriculture stumbled through its most bitter days, the foundations of today's farmland prosperity were laid in the last part of the 19th Century when farmers started to raise dairy cattle instead of beef cattle and began growing chickens commercially. Railroad shipments of milk to the cities started modestly in the 1870s and grew quickly after the Lehigh Valley Railroad built through the county's heart-

land. Establishment of local creameries in the 1880s gave additional impetus to the Hunterdon dairy business.

MEANWHILE, introduction of the portable incubator spurred the county's poultry business in the 1880s. Many objected to incubators, expressing concern over what being mothered by a hunk of tin would do to a baby chick. Others believed incubated chicks would forever smell and taste of kerosene. When a few of the less squeamish found the incubators profitable, even the most scrupulous readily revised their thinking—and today a hatchery like Kerr's in Frenchtown produces between five and six million chicks annually.

As dairy cattle spread over the hillsides and chickens peeped beneath incubators, Hunterdon's farm prosperity edged upward; farm values doubled within the first decade of the 20th Century. Not that the county sped out of the economic woods. Indeed, Hunterdon's fiscal picture never looked blacker than it did after the county borrowed \$315,000 between 1910 and 1915 to resurface its archaic roads. Unfortunately, the resurfacing proved as fleeting as the bonds proved firm. Bitter farmers slogging over rutted roads in the early 1920 complained that the county had built "one-year roads on 30-year bonds."

By 1930 the county debt rose to \$1,500,000 and the roads continued poor. The darkness was blackest, but just ahead was economic dawn.

Some of the "city folk" who had bought small Hunterdon farms in the 1920s began to get the hang of the land by 1930. That year, for the first time in six decades, the county census showed an increase over the previous 10-year mark. The county freeholders voted in 1930 to issue no more bonds. Finally, and possibly most important, the Flemington Auction Market started.

HUNTERDON farmers, long used to accepting for their products whatever they could get, showed little enthusiasm for the auction at first. More

than 1,200 chicken men were contacted; only 40 sent eggs for sale at the first auction held in a Main street basement in August, 1930. A leading auctioneer predicted the venture would be a certain failure—and refused to sell the 80 cases of eggs on hand for the first sale.

Within a year, however, the co-operative venture proved itself. In 1931 the group began to auction live poultry and in 1936 added livestock auctions. Today annual sales are in the neighborhood of \$8,500,000 annually, and the auction market is a continuing factor in improving conditions on farms, because farmers know prices and know breeding and marketing techniques.

Moreover, the co-operative auction market has led the way to other noted Hunterdon co-operative agricultural ventures. In 1939 the Hunterdon County Board of Agriculture established near Clinton the nation's first co-operative artificial cattle breeding unit in the United States. The New Jersey Poultry and Egg Co-operative Marketing Association, a statewide farmer co-operative, chose Flemington in 1946 as its central point for packaging state certified eggs.

Working together, Hunterdon County farmers made their own prosperity. Nearly 70 per cent of the county's acreage is farmed—and farmed so well that it represents \$15,000,000 a year income (mainly dairy products, \$7,000,000, and poultry products, \$6,600,000).

MUCH of the county's prosperous state can be traced to a tax windfall dating from 1937 to 1945, when more than 170 large corporations from all over the nation set up offices of record in Flemington to take advantage of low local taxes. Standard Oil started the parade in 1937 by moving in from Linden. More than \$275,000,000 in ratables followed—and, while the corporations existed in the borough mainly in filing cabinets or as names on office doors, local tax rates plummeted.

The state acted in 1945 to end col-

lection of intangible corporation taxes by Flemington (or any other individual municipality), but the staggering blow saw Hunterdon emerge happily—its roads in good shape, its budget firm and its bonded indebtedness reduced to zero. Today, of course, the tax rate has jumped back up, but the county doesn't have nearly the tax worries of many neighbors.

The Hunterdon Hills in 1952 are sheltering a relatively new type of settler—the wealthy and the artistic who have bought some of the handsome old stone houses and beautiful rolling acres. A select commuting class has also entered the county, and so many of them have become businessman-farmer combinations that the county agricultural agent keeps his office open Saturdays to answer their questions.

WORKING together extends outward from the farmer co-operatives, into such intercommunity ventures as the recently completed North Hunterdon Regional High School near Clinton, sponsored by 11 North Hunterdon school districts, and the \$2,000,000 hospital under construction north of Flemington, the product of county-wide volunteer contributions.

However, the best example of co-operative action is Flemington's Choir School, where children of the town's five churches—Protestant and Catholic—have been learning sweet music since 1895. Miss Elizabeth V. F. Vosseller, who founded the school in the Presbyterian Church, soon asked Miss Bessie R. Hopewell to become co-director and the two women guided the school through most of its years. Hundreds of Flemington youngsters have learned not only music but many of the amenities of life in the school of the Misses Vosseller and Hopewell.

Intense though the Hauptmann trial proved to be, Hunterdon County has far transcended it. World news usually overlooks Hunterdon, possibly figuring six solid weeks in 1935 was enough. Hunterdon—proud of its past, secure in its present and confident of its future—doesn't care.